

got 12 minutes?

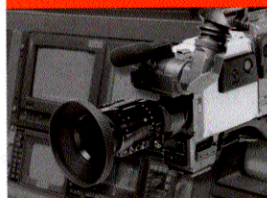
Asking Less of
Viewers Might
Get You More

"Give us 12 minutes and we'll give you Tucson."

Aside from being a catchy new promotional line for Tucson 12, the City of Tucson's government access channel, this invitation underscores the challenge facing all access stations as cable subscribers' channel choices continue to multiply. How do you keep the viewers' interest in a 100-plus channel world? A world in which audience attention spans continue to get shorter, if industry consultants are correct.

The mission of producing and distributing programming that meets the needs of your jurisdiction is in itself a full time challenge for government access stations with small staffs and limited budgets. The issue then of figuring out how to get citizens to tune in and actually stay tuned can be easily overlooked. At Tucson 12 this issue has been an on-going challenge since our start-up and continues to be a critical part of our programming philosophy. This philosophy is built on a foundation of three basic elements; quality, variety, and good storytelling.

Best Practices in



**Government
Multimedia**

BY DAN SHEFFER

NATOA®, JOURNAL OF MUNICIPAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS POLICY

We needed a strategy that would allow us to produce the widest variety of programming, address the issues most important to the City, and make the most of the resources we had available.

■ **A Good Start**

A commitment to the best production quality possible has been one of our goals from the very beginning. Our good fortune at being assigned a channel on the lower end of the dial pointed up the fact that viewers would pass our station while flipping between the local network affiliates. It seemed essential that the quality of our images and sound match or exceed those of the local broadcast stations. We wanted viewers to fully accept us as one of their legitimate local station choices. Of course, like most government stations we learned quickly that we needed to supplement our own productions with outside programming. Twenty-four/seven is quite a big hole to fill in the TV world. These quality guidelines guided the choice of outside programming as well as in-house productions. Other factors considered were the uniqueness of the program (was anyone else on the local dial offering this information), entertainment value, and how well the program fit within our local station identity.

Audience research has confirmed that the majority of our viewers find Channel 12 as they surf through the dial. This information is invaluable in providing us with a blueprint for reaching out to our audience. Quality compelling video and sound is the first step in getting the viewer to stop on Tucson 12. Getting them to stay tuned can be a greater challenge.

■ **Budget Issues Drive Change**

The issue of creating a wide variety of local programming with a small staff and limited budget had become a serious issue for our station by 2002. With continued budget cuts we became increasingly dependent on funds from other departments to produce city programs. Both the Police and Parks and Recreation Departments had committed money to produce half-hour monthly shows but they were only paying a portion of the production costs. Though these shows were popular and well received by both the agencies and the general public, Channel 12 staff was spending a majority of its time producing programming for a few select city agencies. We were also producing a half-hour news magazine program and 5 minute news show that had to encapsulate information from all other city departments.

When budget issues forced the City to cut funding for both the Police and Parks programs, Channel 12 not only found itself with two fewer shows, but viewers lost local programming and city departments lost a valuable venue for getting information to the public. We needed a new plan at Tucson 12. We needed a strategy that would allow us to produce the widest

variety of programming, address the issues most important to the City, and make the most of the resources we had available.

■ **12 on 12**

Like many of our best ideas, our new plan didn't come out of a formal staff meeting or brainstorming session. All it took was a few staff members hanging around at the end of the day and a crew getting ready to go out on an early evening shoot. You never know where creativity will strike. It can happen anywhere at anytime. Since Channel 12 began we had built our programming schedule around the half-hour model. After all, this is the way television has been structured from the very beginning and who are we to mess with tradition? But what if a show didn't have to fit into a thirty-minute slot? What if a program could be 15 minutes? Or 12? The 12 on 12 concept was born.

After this idea got on the track the possibilities really started to pick up steam. 12-minute shows would give us the capability to focus on two completely different subjects in the same half-hour time frame. We could create a venue to get out more information in the same amount of time. A topic that might not be able to sustain an entire thirty minutes might fit well into 12. We could also give more city departments the opportunity to have their own programs. The promotional possibilities were built into the concept. Finally, the viewer who surfs to our station now has to commit a shorter amount of time to see an entire program, and then may stay tuned to see what's next.

The first step in making this rather revolutionary concept a reality was getting a grip on reality ourselves. Figuring out just how many 12-minute shows we would be able to produce based on our current staffing levels was a challenge. Since we had no practical experience producing programs of this length we could only estimate the amount of production time required. We decided to commit to four new programs. In addition, two currently produced 5-minute programs "City News" and "Pet Connection" would be expanded to fit the 12-minute format. We discontinued our 30-minute magazine "Tucson Journal."

Next, decisions had to be made on the subject matter for the new shows. An initial list of eight topics was drawn up. City management then selected four subjects they felt were most critical to the city and citizens of Tucson. The top four: public safety, transportation, downtown redevelopment, and finally some type of forum for citizens to address city leaders concerning topical issues.

Got **12 Minutes?**

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■ **Lights, Camera, Action**

With our subject matter selected the work of producing four new programs from scratch began. Each program was assigned a two person production team consisting of a writer/producer and photographer/editor. A freelance graphics/editor was also brought on board to facilitate the opens, closes, and other production elements needed for each program. Staff met with the specific department heads, came up with show titles and auditioned talent. The final line-up for our four new shows became:

On Scene - Public Safety

The Beat - Downtown

In Motion - Transportation

12 Answers - Public Issues Forum

We set a rigorous three-month schedule for producing the first episode of each new magazine format show. The programs were staggered into our schedule over a two-month period. After a few initial bugs were worked out and the first few episodes of the new monthly programs aired, we focused on an aggressive on-air promotional campaign, informing the viewers about our new look. We discovered some unanticipated benefits with the new format. We now have three minutes at the middle and bottom of each half-hour for promoting the schedule and upcoming shows. The shorter format also works better for the video streaming capability on our web-site, www.tucson12.tv.

We have made a commitment for twelve episodes of each program to the various departments involved. Each show will be re-evaluated for "renewal." At approximately six months into our grand experiment,

viewer and management response has been extremely encouraging. An audience research survey planned for later this year, hopefully, will give us more scientific results, but in the meantime public feedback and awareness of Channel 12 seem to be increasing. Our public forum program, *12 Answers*, directs the public to our web-site to comment on City issues. This becomes a built-in component to track viewers.

We continue to learn more about the challenges of producing and promoting this new concept on a daily basis. We now know that the time needed to produce twelve minutes doesn't vary too much from the time it takes to produce thirty. We are fine-tuning our staffing to compensate. We are also learning how to work our commitment to storytelling, a critical element in holding viewers, into the shorter format.

Perhaps the real lesson of this creative journey is not the nuts and bolts of our new shows themselves, but rather our willingness to examine our programming from a fresh perspective. Essential to any programming, no matter what format, style, or time-frame, is the need to engage the viewer. This should be a consideration in every program produced regardless of the mission of your station or the information you are tasked to get out to the public. Audience research and surveys can be effective tools, but sometimes your greatest asset is your, and your staffs', own sensibilities. Ask yourself what you would like to see. If you find the way the information is presented boring you can bet your audience will too. Information is valuable only if the viewer is inspired to take action. In today's 100-plus channel world, getting and keeping your audience is as important as the message itself. ■